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ABSTRACT

As English becomes institutionalized in nations that do not share its Western cultural traditions, the language broadens. The English produced in new contexts naturally takes on the flavor of its surroundings, delivering a blend of native and Western linguistic features, semantic and pragmatic qualities, literary heritages, and the like. The literature written in these distinctive varieties of English is often called contact literature. Writers of contact literature deny that a non-English culture is inexpressible in English and argue that the cultural material in contact literature will stretch or reshape the expressive qualities of English. The rise of contact literature in English provides an opportunity to study the literary effort of international writers and to observe the vital process of language change. This change is of special interest to English teachers and students, since it is their language they are observing, and since the development it undergoes will make it a more sensitive and authentic vehicle for creative expression of consciousness in Western and non-Western cultures. (RS)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

Contact Literature in English

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English is now a world language. Linguists have compared the role of modern English to the Latin of the late Roman Empire and to the historic importance of Sanskrit throughout the South Asian subcontinent. At first largely through the often unwelcome agency of the British Empire, and more recently through the influence of industry, aviation, the information age, and attendant technologies, English has come to play a significant role in many cultures in which it is not indigenous. Cultures affected include those in India and the rest of South Asia, in East and West Africa, the Caribbean, the Philippines, many Asian countries, and arguably, American and Canadian Indian nations.

As English becomes institutionalized in nations that do not share its Western cultural traditions, the language broadens. Contact with non-Western cultures and languages calls English into service to express new linguistic and cultural functions. The English produced in new contexts naturally takes on the "flavor" of its surroundings, delivering a blend of native and Western linguistic features, semantic and pragmatic qualities, literary heritages, and the like. As a consequence, linguists have begun to recognize "nativized Englishes" as distinctive varieties of the language.

Kachru (1985) has analyzed the relationships among the Englishes of what he calls the "Inner Circle" (native English cultures) and the "Outer Circle" (non-native English cultures). Since the nativized varieties of English are produced through contact with the culture and surrounding languages, the literatures written in those varieties are often called contact literatures. (The term also applies to literature written in nativized varieties of other languages—African French, for example.)

Contact literature in English, then, is of considerable interest to a number of academic studies, including sociolinguistics, comparative literature, semiotics, reader-response theory, and English as a second language. These works also provide a trove of material for the mainstream English classroom. For many English teachers, however, contact literature poses a number of questions.

Is Contact Literature Credible Literature?

This is more than a question of taste. Linguists, teachers, and general readers alike wonder if it is truly possible in a given language adequately to represent the experience, thought, or discourse style of a culture not native to that language. Blaber (1981) uncovers the semiotic ground that underlies this question, describing the special predicament of the creative writer in a second language. Drawing on the terminology of semiotician Yuri Lotman, he distinguishes between (1) the linguistic dimension—the *conventions* of language (syntax, lexicon, and so forth), and (2) the cultural dimension—the personal or cultural *content* of a text.

The linguistic dimension provides formal information in terms of what Lotman calls a "primary modeling system," while the cultural dimension—philosophy, attitudes, aesthetics—constitutes a "secondary modeling system." These systems merge within the text to give a work its meaning. In Lotman's view, the primary system (formal) dominates the secondary system (cultural); thus, writers of contact literature should be frustrated, trapped (though by choice) within language conventions that are alien to their culture. Blaber sees this as a variation of the controversial Whorf-Sapir hypothesis (i.e., that what is possible to say dominates what is possible to think).

Stated simply, the question is: won't contact literature be ineffective since so much of the non-English culture will be inexpressible in English?

To this, the writers answer a resounding "no." Chinua Achebe, noted Nigerian poet and fictionist, says,

> I feel the English language will be able to carry the weight of my experience. But it will have to be a new English, still

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> in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings. . . . The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. (1976, p. 82)

K. S. Narayana Rao agrees:

> Expressions in the original language acquire a new sense in English, or what is perfectly sensible in one language becomes illogical when put in another. For the Indian writing in English, the challenge is to bend it to suit the needs to convey Indian sensibility. (1973, p. 160)

These writers suggest that the cultural material (Lotman's secondary modeling system) will stretch or reshape the expressive possibilities of the language (primary modeling system). One need only remember the variations in the English used by native speakers (compare the American with the Irish, for example) to see that this is plausible.

Is the Language Used Really English?

One of the most important current problems in U.S. education is the mistrust that many teachers and policymakers feel toward language variation (Schuster et al. 1987). The impetus behind the "English Only" movement and the current back-to-basics reform seems to spring from a confidence that what we call Standard English is somehow above the reach of variation.

However, a glance at the history of English in America reminds us that the dialect called standard has changed markedly over time. "Fourscore and seven years," for example, was a conspicuously nonstandard construction only a generation or two after Lincoln used it at Gettysburg (if indeed it wasn't nonstandard—and thus memorable—by then). Even among modern speakers of "standard" American English, slang ("yuppie"), neologisms ("prioritize"), and loan words from other languages ("cassette") enter the lexicon regularly. Further variation is found in the regional pronunciations that compete for acceptance and prestige. And, of course, a comparison of American usage, lexicon, and accent with Canadian, Australian, English, and Irish reveals what a wide range of variation is tolerable among native "inner circle" speakers of a single language.

Indian writer Raja Rao expressed the following position in 1943:

> We cannot write like the English. . . . We cannot write *only* as Indians. . . . Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish and the American. (p. viii)

This perspective reveals (1) that the English that Americans write is as much a product of language contact, physical environment, history, and development as any other variety of English, and (2) that the newer varieties of written English—such as Indian English and African English—can be studied with the interest and respect we accord the established varieties, such as Irish and American English.

How Are Variations Reflected in Contact Literature?

Only a few examples can be given here. According to S. N. Sridhar (1982), when Raja Rao sets out to "bend" English to convey Indian sensibility in a passage like the one below, he creates an almost endless chain of coordinations. The result is a very effective facsimile of the "breathless" cadences of Kannada, a South Asian language typified by strings of interdependent constructions:

> Then the police inspector saunters up to the Skefflington gate, and he opens it and one coolie and two coolies and three coolies come out, their faces dark as mops and their blue skin black under the clouded heavens, and perspiration flows down their bodies and their eyes seem fixed to the earth—one coolie and two coolies and three coolies and

four and five come out, their eyes fixed to the earth, their stomachs black and clammy and bulging, and they march toward the toddy booth; and then suddenly more coolies come out, more and more and more like clogged bullocks. . . . (Rao, p. 137)

Authors use other devices to convey in English the sound and flavor of their native culture. Sridhar lists the following common examples from Indian English writers:

the verbless sentence—"Don't touch. Not completely dry yet." (Narayan 1976)

the subjectless sentence—"When a man says 'I love you' it sounds mechanical. . . . Perhaps credible in Western society, but sounds silly in ours." (Narayan 1976)

questions without inversion—"Brother, you are with me?" (Rao 1943)

left and right dislocation—"And he can sing too, can Jayaramachar." (Rao 1943)

Kachru (1983) details other experiments in style and discourse that transform English to create the sensibility of other non-English, "outer circle" cultures.

How Does Contact Literature Work in the Classroom?

Since writers of contact literature necessarily draw from a double repertoire of literary traditions, a critical approach that accommodates only Western tradition would not be productive in the classroom. Edwin Thumboo (1985) details a theoretical perspective that accounts for both the the non-English and the English (i.e., Western) literary "ecology." Each, he says, "has powerful traditions marked by particular linguistic, literary and aesthetic preoccupations," and the connections between the two need to be addressed.

As the writer's native culture bends the formal conventions of Western English, it also requires readers to bend their expectations of both what is tolerable formally and what is predictable culturally in English. May (1983) suggests that a good way to start in the classroom is to discuss the culture encountered in the literature. Particular attention to students' linguistic and cultural biases is warranted, including possible pretesting of cultural knowledge and class discussion of customs, history, myths, and languages within the culture.

The experience of reading contact literature for the first time can seem exotic, both linguistically and culturally, eliciting important exploratory responses from students. For this reason, a pedagogy grounded in reader-response theory or transactional criticism seems useful. Probst (1987) notes that such an approach encourages students "to articulate responses, examine their origins in the text and in other experiences, reflect upon them, and analyze them. . . . Discussions should encourage students not to win but to clarify and refine."

The rise of contact literatures in English provides an opportunity to study in a unique way the literary efforts of international writers, and at the same time to observe the vital process of language change. This change is of special interest to English teachers and students, since it is *our* language we are observing, and since the development it undergoes will make it a more sensitive and authentic vehicle for creative expression of consciousness in Western and non-Western cultures.

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